



Seattle Human Rights Commission

1963 – 2013 · 50 years of championing human rights and fostering a just future

Statement of the Seattle Human Rights Commission Chris Stearns, Chairman

Hearing on Proposed Jobs Assistance Ordinance

City Council Committee on Public Safety, Civil Rights & Technology May 15, 2013

Good afternoon Chairman Harrell and Committee members Licata and O'Brien. The Seattle Human Rights Commission would like to thank you for holding this hearing on the proposed jobs assistance ordinance. We strongly believe that the time has come for the Committee to advance this legislation.

Over three years ago, on May 6, 2010, our Commission was approached by more than fifteen residents of Sojourner Place who asked for our help in adding a protected class to the City's housing discrimination law for non-violent offenders, non-sexual misdemeanors or felonies. The women pointed out to us then that Madison, Wisconsin had such a law on the books. That started our journey to where we are today.

What the women of Sojourner's place asked for is simple. And compelling. They asked for the Council to pass a law that would allow them to (1) reunite with their family, especially their children; (2) get a second chance at life; and (3) improve their employment opportunities.

Our goal has always remained simple: to protect the human right to dignity, the right to be free from discrimination, and the right to work by ending discrimination against people whose past record does not relate to their employment, nor pose a threat to public safety.

Last December, Seattle proclaimed itself by Council Resolution 31420 a Human Rights City, and by doing so, became just one of a handful of such cities in the United States who have committed to protecting human rights.

Against this backdrop, we point out to the Council the tremendous reach of the problem before us. The fact is that racial disparities persist throughout the criminal justice system due to racial disparities in arrest rates, conviction rates and sentencing terms. In Washington, African Americans comprise only a little more than 3% of the population yet account for over 19% of those in prison. Native Americans make up only 1.4% of the state's population yet comprise 4.6% of those in prison. Nearly two-thirds of people released from prison served time for non-violent offenses and 2 out of 3 non-violent offenders released from prison each year are people of color (48% African-American, 25% Latino). We strongly believe that the bill before you, when passed, will help stop the racial disparity that carries over to the employment market.

We also believe that passage of this bill will promote stable families and reduce recidivism.



Seattle Human Rights Commission

1963 – 2013 · 50 years of championing human rights and fostering a just future

That said, we believe there are two simple changes that can make the bill stronger.

1. We strongly encourage the Council to ban advertising that has the effect of discouraging people with criminal arrests or convictions from even applying for work. That would undermine the entire intent of the bill. Thus, we recommend that the Committee amend the bill to include a new section 3.7 (insert at page 5, line 17) which states:

“No employer shall advertise, publicize, or implement any policy or practice that automatically or categorically excludes all individuals with any arrest or conviction record from any employment position that will be performed in whole or in substantial part (generally at least 50% of the time) within the City.”

2. We also ask the Council to consider adding a provision that would give an applicant who is notified by a prospective employer that his conviction record has a direct relationship with the employment sought or held the chance to explain or correct any misinformation in his or her conviction record.

We are pleased that the draft bill before us today protects the human rights to dignity, work, and freedom from discrimination. We are not suggesting that the bill is perfect. But the bill strongly advances the City’s goal of ending discrimination and promoting job opportunities for those who need it the most. We strongly commend the City Council central and personal staff, the Seattle Office for Civil Rights, and the many stakeholders from both business and community. The product before you is the result of years of hard work.

We urge the Committee to pass the bill so the full City Council can vote on the bill as soon as possible.

###